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ABSTRACT

A study determined if there was a significant difference in the writing skills of eighth graders after they completed a writing class that based the method of instruction on the writing process. Subjects, 743 students in a midwestern school system, completed the class and were administered pretests and posttests. The results supported the supposition that writing instruction should center on the process of writing and that students should be provided with the opportunity to write daily. Findings suggest that writing instruction does increase students' writing skills. In response to this research in writing instruction, a class for paragraph development--based on the steps of the writing process--was added to the eighth grade curriculum. (Seventeen references are appended.) (MS)

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Instruction of the Writing Process Affects Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference in the writing skills of 8th grade students after they completed a writing course that based the method of instruction on the writing process. Each student was pretested before they received instruction and posttested after instruction. Their pretest and posttest scores were compared using a dependent, two-tailed "t" test. It was found that there was a significant "t" value of 16.9 (df=742, p .001) between the pretest and posttest scores after the students had completed the class. Therefore it was concluded that writing instruction based on the writing process did increase the students' writing skills.

Introduction

Students' writing skills have been a source of concern for educators, as well as the public, and have recently become of interest to researchers. "A Nation at Risk" (1983) states that 13% of all 17-year-olds in the United States are functionally illiterate. "Action for Excellence" (cited in Kostelny, 1987) states that in a study of high school students, 53% could not write a letter to correct a billing error. As a result, writing is included in competency testing programs many states have inplemented, or will be implementing.

The theory of teaching writing through instruction of the writing process is one area of interest to researchers. Researchers have investigated the steps of the process and have concluded that the process does contribute to developing better writing skills.

As a result of research in writing instruction, a class for paragraph development was added to the 8th grade curriculum for a midwestern school system in a city of approximately 32,000. The course of study, for the nine weeks class, was based on the steps of the writing process. Through this process, the students received class instruction, as well as teacher guided remediation and enrichment assistance.

The writing process was defined as a four step procedure which consists of pre-writing, writing the first draft, revising and editing, and writing the final draft. During the pre-writing stage, the writer plans and organizes his thoughts,

identifies his audience and purpose, records notes, and organizes his notes into an outline. In the second step, he uses his outline to write his ideas into complete thoughts, which make up the first draft. Once he has developed his ideas into a paragraph form, he is ready for the third step of revising and editing. During this step, the writer reorganizes, clarifies, adds details, checks for unrelated ideas, and improves sentence development, as well as proofreads for errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics. The last step is to write the final draft. Although the writing process is presented as steps, it is a circular process with all of the steps interrelated.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine if there was a significant difference in the students' writing skills after they completed the class.

Review of Related Literature

Teaching writing composition should improve writing skills, however teaching writing composition is not accomplished in a grammar class that teaches the parts of speech, parts of sentences, types of clauses, etc. A study conducted in New Zealand by Elley and colleagues (1976) compared both traditional and generative grammar treatments to a no-grammar treatment. Their results showed no significant difference in writing quality and none in sub-scores for groups over the four years

of the study. The conclusion is that the study of grammar does not contribute to growth in the quality of student writing. The same conclusions were reached in independent studies by Hillocks (1986) and Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963).

A study by Barbara W. Cheshire (1984) indicated that free writing did not produce significant effects on fluency or on any other designated component of writing. Applebee's (1981) study indicated that instruction that does not provide pre-writing activities, no opportunity for revision, in writing that is usually superficial and poorly organized.

Results of a study by Polen and White (1986) confirmed their general hypothesis that the organization of composition instruction does matter in achieving better writing performance. Maximum effectiveness is gained by instruction that stresses procedural knowledge (Kostelny, 1987). Instructional methods have an effect on helping students develop most aspects of composing. Students are lead in evaluation of compositions and given prompts to help revise the piece. In independent studies by Sager and Coleman (cited in Hillocks, 1987), it appeared that guided revision helped students develop better control over and understanding of the selection content.

During the revision process the writer uses high cognitive processes to solve revision problems to achieve meaning. According to Daniel Marder (1982), true meaning occurs when

the work is revised and rewritten, not only in the form of rewording, but also in style and form. Research on the writing process shows that skilled writers spend a longer period of time on revision than do unskilled writers. More than one half the writing time of skilled writers is spent reading and revising (Humes, 1983).

Research by Hillock (1979, 1982) indicates that the process of observing and writing is much more effective in increasing the quality of student writing than the traditional study of model paragraphs that illustrates the use of strategies. Using this focus of instruction, a student is presented with data, designated a task to be performed using the data, and provided with guidance in performing that task. Students become proficient using the strategies after repeating this procedure several times, each time using different data. Other research that closely parallels this type of inquiry was tested by Troyka (cited in Hillocks, 1987). In this study, results strongly suggest that writers must learn strategies for transforming raw data.

Inadequacies in students' writing abilities in New York prompted a study by Lois E. Turetzky (1986). The finding of that study clearly showed that as a result of a systematic instructional approach to improve writing abilities, the number of students that scored above the state reference point increased by 3.4%, and the number falling below decreased by 1.5%.

The evidence seems to clearly suggest that the appropriate instruction of writing skills does in fact improve students' writing ability. Hillocks (1987) stated this effectively when he said, "The research indicates that when curriculums begin to focus on such procedural knowledge, they will begin to produce more effective writers."

Statement of the Hypothesis

The research suggests that writing instruction does increase students' writing skills. According to Graves (1983), daily writing is an important part of the instruction. Turetzky's (1986) research showed there was a significant improvement in a fourth grade class' writing skills. Therefore, it is hypothesized that eighth grade students, who have received daily instruction in the writing process for a period of nine weeks, will increase their writing skills.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 8th grade students in a midwestern school system. All of the students who completed the class during the school years of 1985-1986 and 1986-1987 were used, as well as half of the students from the school year 1987-1988. The remaining students from the 1987-1988 school year were not included because they had not, as yet, completed the class when the results were tabulated.

The total sample included 817 students. Students who had not taken either the pretest or posttest, because of absence or withdrawal from the school system, were excluded from the study. Therefore, a total of 743 students were included in the final results.

Instrument

The effectiveness of the class was determined by comparing the students' pretest and posttest scores. The test was teacher made and teacher scored. The skills tested were skills that, according to the city school's language arts course of study and as determined by the committee who developed the school's competency testing program, are mastered by the 8th grade. A reliability for the test of .86 was determined by calculation using the Kuder-Richardson formula.

Procedure

Permission was received from the school principal to use all the students, who had completed the writing class, to compare their pretest and posttest scores. All of the students participated in the same course of study and received instruction by the same teacher.

The class received instruction on the organization of a paragraph, the steps of the writing process, and the development of specific kinds of paragraphs. Each student received individual instruction, through writing conferences with the teacher, to develop their weak areas. Therefore, students were provided with remediation instruction or enrichment, whichever was appropriate.

All students who took the writing class were pretested before receiving instruction and posttested at the end of the instruction period. The writing skills evaluated, throughout and at the end of the class, were paragraph development, sentence development, grammar, and mechanics. Paragraph development for this study included logical order of the writer's ideas, related information, suitability for the audience and purpose, and clarity. Sentence variety, specific wording, and the absence of run-ons or fragments made up the section on sentence development. Grammar skills included correct verb form and tense and the correct use of pronouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Capitalization, spelling,

and punctuation were included under mechanics.

The students were provided with the same prompt for both tests and wrote a paragraph in response to the prompt of at least 60 words. The paragraph was analytically scored each time for the same skills. There were thirty skills that each paragraph was examined for. Each skill the student used correctly was worth one point, consequently a score of thirty was possible. If a student did not use a particular skill it was considered an error.

Results

The writing pretest and posttest were compared using a dependent, two-tailed "t" test. Results showed that the mean for the pretest was 20.7 with a standard deviation of 3.33. The posttest mean was 22.8 with a standard deviation of 3.23. The dependent "t" test produced a significant "t" value of 16.9 (df=742, p .001). The mean difference between the pretests and posttests was 2.1 with a standard deviation of 3.3. To sum up, there was a 10% increase in the students' writing skills at the end of the nine week course.

Discussion

The results of this study support the research hypothesis; Eighth grade students who have received daily instruction in the writing process for a period of nine weeks will increase their writing skills. Since the hypothesis was accepted, this research supports the theory of teaching writing as a process rather than through the use of models or the standard grammatical method.

The results of this study are consistent with those of Graves (1983), Turetski (1986), and Hillocks (1979, 1982) which indicate that the quality of student writing does increase through daily writing and use of a procedural method. Consequently, the findings suggest that writing instruction should center on the process of writing and that students should be provided with the opportunity to write daily. Therefore, a total school writing program should improve the students' writing skills.

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